



Let's Talk

FALL 2011



SCHEDULING FOR SANITY

Time can be a scarce commodity in the workplace. Often, you have to balance dozens of projects while adhering to the unforgiving deadlines of each. Trying to do too much can cause anyone to become more anxious, less productive, and physically exhausted. However, there is a simple cure: effective scheduling.

Scheduling is a process of planning to accomplish goals or projects. A major cause of stress is trying to take on too many projects at once, without having enough time to finish them. Creating a schedule to balance project demands is a first step toward relieving some of the inherent stress of the workday.

A well-constructed schedule brings consistency and allows you to dedicate the most time to the most pressing priorities. At the same time, schedules still allow you to spend time on lower priority items so they don't fall through the cracks. Here is some advice for keeping and maintaining a schedule to stay sane:

USE A SCHEDULING TOOL

An effective schedule must be something tangible that is easy to refer back to. There is no way employees can mentally track all of their responsibilities – that is how they lose track of appointments and deadlines. Instead, have a schedule that is either written or electronic so it will be easier to keep track of. A scheduling tool can appear in any format – from a sophisticated piece of software to a well-maintained legal pad – as long as it is comfortable and enables you to manage time and projects accurately.

PLAN AHEAD

To be a smart scheduler, get in the habit of scheduling consistently. Setting up a daily schedule on only the busiest days won't do much good. Instead, set up a schedule at the start of each week or month to identify the long-term projects that need the most attention. From there, set aside manageable time blocks during each day, focused on the central goal, and construct the rest of your schedule around these high-priority projects. Also, pretend all major projects must be finished 24 hours before they are due, to allow for a final review or any last-minute adjustments.

ADD EXTRA TIME FOR EACH TASK

Never assume it is feasible to complete any task faster than it can realistically be completed, or it can throw off your schedule completely. In addition, always add 10-20% more time than expected for project completion, to account for unexpected distractions or unaccounted for travel time. □



SUCCESSFULLY WEATHERING THE STRESS OF CHANGE

As the cliché goes, the only constant in life is change.

Most of us realize that change is an ever-present part of life; however, typically we’re not prepared for the extreme stresses that can accompany it.

Research has shown that all changes, even changes usually considered to be positive, can be major sources of stress. Most would be surprised to learn that the stress from a joyous event, like getting married, can have as large an impact on your health as the stress from a less pleasant event, like losing a job. However, ultimately, what creates significantly high stress levels may not be related to the actual event as much as to how one copes with the changes it brings. Signs that you may be experiencing overwhelming stress related to a significant life change include:

- Sleep disturbances** – sleeping too little or too much
- Changes in eating patterns** – not having an appetite or overeating to reduce stressful feelings
- Changes in mood** – feeling persistently overwhelmed, sad, or agitated

Here are some tips to help you maintain your physical and mental health while experiencing significant life changes.

Identify and use a support system. Your system can include friends, family, co-workers, or even neighbors with whom you feel comfortable connecting, venting if necessary, and getting feedback.

Exercise regularly to help your body produce necessary stress-fighting chemicals.

Participate in activities that bring you enjoyment, such as hobbies, sports, and social activities.

Maintain a healthy diet to help your body weather the effects of stress by keeping your immune system strong.

There are, of course, times when the above suggestions may not be enough. If you are feeling overwhelmed and in need of a little extra help, contact the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The EAP is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Trained professionals will help you manage both the emotional and practical challenges you may be experiencing related to a recent life change. □



WHEN TO SEEK HELP FOR DEPRESSION

More than just a feeling of being “*down in the dumps*” or “*blue*” for a few days, depression is recognized as a serious and treatable medical disorder.

If you are one of the more than 20 million people in the United States who has depression, the feelings of sadness may not go away. Instead, they may persist and interfere with your everyday life. The good news, however, is that several treatments for depression have proven effective, including the use of antidepressant medication and therapy. It has been observed that many people fare best by using both methods together.

IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM

A significant step toward treating depression is identifying it. If you experience feelings of sadness or feeling “down” to the extent or frequency that they interfere with your enjoyment of life, it is entirely appropriate to seek help. To determine if you or someone close to you may be experiencing depression, consider the symptoms listed below.

DEPRESSION WARNING SIGNS

- According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), some of the signs and symptoms of depression include:
- Persistent sad, anxious or “empty” feelings

- Feelings of hopelessness and/or pessimism
- Irritability, restlessness, anxiety
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness and/or helplessness
- Loss of interest in activities or hobbies once pleasurable
- Fatigue and decreased energy
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering details and making decisions
- Insomnia, waking up during the night, or excessive sleeping
- Overeating, or appetite loss
- Thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts
- Persistent aches or pains, headaches, cramps or digestive problems that do not ease even with treatment

WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you believe that you or someone close to you may be suffering from depression, contact your health care provider or your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Depression is a very real and treatable illness. It is not something that you need to struggle with alone. □



FIVE TIPS TO BOOST YOUR WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Strong interpersonal communication skills are essential for success in the working world.

Like any workplace skill, however, we can often use some help to learn how to better communicate. The following six tips will sharpen your communication skills with your boss, coworkers, and clients. Before you know it, you'll be making a lasting impression as a great communicator.

BE CLEAR AND CONCISE

Try to convey your message without ambiguity. Doing this is easier said than done, however, especially at work, where concepts being discussed may be complex or difficult. Nevertheless, resist the temptation to overload listeners with information through overly complex or lengthy sentences. Keeping your messages concise makes them more likely to be retained. Even if the concept under discussion is complex, listeners retain more of a message that is delivered via direct sentences, rather than via rambling ones.

BE AWARE OF UNSPOKEN CUES

A lot can be communicated through subtle clues in the speaker's tone of voice and body language. Therefore, when communicating at work, try to meet in person whenever possible to better understand a colleague's tone and body language. In addition, all the rules for projecting a confident image apply: stand up straight, make eye contact when speaking, have a firm handshake, and smile whenever acceptable.

BE COURTEOUS AND POSITIVE

A kind word or simple act can make all the difference in establishing a good impression with your coworkers. Hold the door for a colleague, put in a good word to your boss about a coworker, or just smile and say "please" and "thank you" every now and then. Others will reciprocate these good deeds. Also, stay optimistic by framing potentially critical issues as opportunities for improvement. Whereas negativity can destroy one's desire to achieve, pointing out one or two positives to balance every negative can encourage others to reach their full potential.

NEVER LET DISAGREEMENTS TURN INTO ARGUMENTS

While it's possible to feel frustrated if you disagree with a coworker, make sure to offer only constructive criticism, rather than attacking the value of the other person's opinion. The real enemy to be wary of is not your coworker, but rather the development of a combative or argumentative discussion. Avoid conflict by ensuring that no matter how much you may disagree with a colleague, you express your opposition while still remaining respectful and even collegial. After all, ultimately you are both playing on the same team.

LISTEN

Communication is never a one-way street. The ability to understand what our colleagues are trying to communicate is just as important as being able to make ourselves understood to our colleagues. Make sure others have the opportunity to voice their opinion or respond to what you have said. Check to see if you have been understood by asking, "Did I explain this clearly?" Or, if you are not getting any feedback, ask for it by simply asking, "What do you think?" □



This newsletter is brought to you by the Federal Occupational Health (FOH) Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

The EAP provides assessment, counseling, referral, management consultation, and coaching services to Federal employees and agencies throughout the United States.

For administrative details about the program, contact Chiquita Cooper at 404.562.7950, ext. 125, or e-mail at Chiquita.Cooper@foh.hhs.gov.

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